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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 006635

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NEW DELHI FOR A/S BOUCHER

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR A/S BOUCHER'S VISIT TO BANGLADESH

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Bangladesh is fixated on looming elections. Turbulent in the best of times, this year they are plagued by violence, a possible boycott, a wobbly caretaker government, a meddling former ruling party, and an aggressive opposition divided on whether it really wants an election. Despite facing similar threats in 2001, that election ultimately succeeded because of strong, coordinated leadership by the President, the Chief Adviser, and the Chief Election Commissioner.

¶2. (C) Today, two-thirds of that triumvirate reside in the frail body of a 75-year-old retired professor with uncertain instincts and loyalties, while the other third faces massive pressure to resign for bungling and bias. Once internationally hailed as an innovative mechanism for conducting neutral elections, the caretaker government system has been victimized by politicization of the judiciary charged with providing its leadership, and may be in its final iteration.

¶3. (C) The stakes are high because in this winner-take-all environment, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is poised to become the first party in Bangladesh ever to win re-election. While experts differ on who would win on a level playing field, many agree that the victor will be the party with the broadest coalition, which at this point means the former ruling party.

¶4. (C) The immediate threat is renewed violence and its possible triggering of a presidential State of Emergency. Having already extended once its ultimatum to the government, the Awami League says that on November 12 it will resume its nationwide transportation blockade if its wide-ranging demands are unmet. After pocketing the exit of Justice Hasan as presumptive Chief Adviser, the Awami League's new top demand is reconstitution of the Election Commission, whose embattled chief refuses to quit, despite private pleas from Chief Adviser Ahmed and many others.

¶5. (C) The opposition's blockade, if it aggressively enforced and prolonged, would produce significant inter-party clashes and other acts of violence. The order for emergency rule was drafted in the final days of the outgoing government, is waiting for the President's signature, and would, according to the constitution, drastically curtail civil liberties. If it lasted more than a few days, elections in January would be an inevitable casualty. Some hard-line leaders of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party favor almost immediate emergency rule to ensure electoral victory, no matter how tainted. Others expect President Ahmed to deploy, as an interim step,

the military if civilian law enforcement needs support.

¶6. (C) Boycott, justified or not, is another major threat. Reports are mixed on Awami League president Sheikh Hasina's bottom line, whether she wants a pretext to boycott and evade the sting of possible electoral defeat, or whether in the end she'll join the process, perhaps believing her own rhetoric of enjoying massive popular support. We continue to hope the Awami League will join the election, but the situation is volatile.

¶7. (C) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and its alliance partner Jamaat Islami, were largely victims in the last round of violence, which killed 50 persons and injured hundreds others. Promises of restraint by party chairperson Khaleda Zia aside, supporters of the former ruling party have been armed with sticks in anticipation of new clashes with the Awami League. Zia insists her workers have the right of self-defense.

¶8. (C) There is evidence that the former ruling party is meddling with the caretaker government. It has secured changes in personnel announcements, and apparently encouraged Chief Adviser Ahmed to keep his generally talented advisors on the sidelines, confining them to running the minor ministries he allotted them. Some advisors have mused to diplomats about resigning. Ahmed is reportedly furious that the advisors, tired of meeting with him just once a week, recently convened without him. Publicly, the caretaker government appears inactive, ceding governance to the bureaucrats it inherited, and has only partially reshuffled, from the outgoing government.

¶9. (C) We continue to emphasize with all parties our support

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for free, fair, credible, non-violent, and accepted elections. We have called for the empowerment of the caretaker advisers to help guide the nation to free and fair elections. We do not support or oppose any party, but urge all sides to exercise restraint and resolve differences by negotiation and compromise, not confrontation and violence.
BUTENIS